LEAP! Activity
“Piecing Together Ravenna, Italy”
Brandon Cochran

Introduction

This LEAP! activity allows students to have a hands-on experience with the ancient art of creating mosaics. While learning about the historical and cultural significance of the world famous mosaics in Ravenna, students use professional mosaic techniques and their imaginations to design their own unique work of art.

Background

Although historians disagree about when and where the origin of mosaics began, there is a general consensus that the craft of mosaic making is one of the earliest forms of art. Many of the oldest mosaics date back to the Mesopotamia and Egyptian civilizations where mosaics adorned jewelry, pottery, and other items. Greece also started a trend of mosaics with some of the earliest artifacts dating back to the 4th century B.C. in ancient Pélla. The Roman Empire and growing Byzantine Empire continued the Greek tradition of decorating with mosaics for many more years. By the 5th century A.D., Roman and Byzantine churches started using mosaics to depict stories from the Bible.

With much Byzantine influence, Ravenna and Venice house the most well-known mosaics in the world. Many of these mosaics are actually covered with silver and gold leaf. While the Byzantine Empire persisted to use mosaics up to the 15th century, mosaics in the Roman Empire declined because of rising prices to make the mosaics. By the Renaissance, paintings and frescoes started to replace the mosaics, but some large churches like St. Peter’s in Rome preserved the tradition of mosaics because they lasted longer than paintings and reflected light better. While mosaics aren’t as popular as they once were, the history, culture, and techniques of these designs still linger with us today and will for many years to come.

NETC Leader Preparation

After a brief introduction of the history of mosaics, the NETC leader will provide color images of various famous buildings and churches around the world that contain mosaics. Leader will also provide color images of various symbols, colors and iconography consistently used in both pagan and Christian mosaic imagery, focusing on the mosaics and symbols of Ravenna. Leader will end with a brief explanation of how churches, such as St. Peter’s, benefit from mosaics over paintings due to the ability of the mosaics to reflect more light and their capability to survive longer than wall frescoes or paintings.
Materials Required

- Many colors of tesserae (small pieces of tile, glass, pottery, etc.)
- Pencils/pens
- Acrylic paper
- Tile adhesive; Tile grout
- Grout knife/ something similar to spread grout
- Towels/sponges
- White paper.

Activity Location

Mosaic Art Studio- Byzantine Workshop in Ravenna, Italy.
Via Francesco Negri, 14 - 48100 Ravenna (Italy)
Phone:(+39) 349-601-4566 Fax:(+39) 0544 67061; Email: mosaic@sira.it

Steps to Complete Activity

1. Using your imagination or a template, draw a mosaic design on a piece of white paper – students will be encouraged to create their own personal symbols based on the ancient designs and symbols that they have been exposed to during this activity.
2. Place the various colors of tesserae on the design and choose which colors you like best and what personal meanings they may hold for you.
3. Take away the tiles from your project and lay the acrylic paper on the design.
4. Put the tile adhesive onto each piece of tesserae and then place each piece over your design. Make sure to leave small gaps between tesserae.
5. Once the adhesive has dried, use your grout knife or similar object to spread grout over the tiles and quickly use towel/sponge to remove excess grout from your design.
6. Once grout has dried, use towel/sponge to clean surface.
7. Now your mosaic is complete and ready to be taken home with you!

Follow-up Activity

Before visiting certain buildings that house mosaics in Ravenna, the NETC leader will want to ask students to search for certain designs that compare to their own mosaics in the building. The leader will also ask students to seek various symbols, stories, people, and designs in each building to increase knowledge and specifics of the mosaics that were used in Ravenna.

"Piecing Together Ravenna" not only allows students to design and create their own mosaic, but also teaches students about the rich history and culture behind the mosaics in Ravenna and the rest of the world. By completing this activity, students will highly appreciate the great mosaics in Ravenna that adorn many buildings and churches and will respect the artists that have made mosaics part of their daily lives and culture.
Lesson Plan for LEAP! Activity “Piecing Together Ravenna”

Learning Objectives

NETC students who complete this LEAP! Activity will:

- Recognize and understand the history of mosaics from the Mesopotamia and Egyptian civilizations to present day mosaic making.
- Appreciate and recognize some of the many important buildings and places that hold the greatest mosaic designs around the world including the many churches/temples in Ravenna, Rome, Istanbul (Constantinople), Venice, etc.
- Understand and gain an appreciation for the tiresome process and ancient techniques involved in creating large mosaics like those in Ravenna
- Discuss the importance of mosaic art as a tool for Christian imagery in Ravenna

Learning Outcomes

NETC students completing this LEAP! Activity will be have:

- Created their own mosaic using tesserae, under the instruction of a professional mosaic designer, to take home with them.
- Identified the colors, designs and symbols of early Christian imagery used in the mosaics of Ravenna and modified and updated them to create their own personal designs.
- Compared and contrasted mosaic designs with paintings and frescoes through the actual application of the technique.

Assessment Activities

NETC Leader can assess and engage student’s during and after the workshop:

- By asking students what colors, designs and symbols might be used in mosaics in present day culture.
- While holding up colored images of some of the most important mosaics in the world, ask students to compare and contrast mosaic designs with that of frescoes and what type of lasting effect do both have on a building.
- By asking students to discuss why large churches, such as St. Peter’s, would benefit from mosaics over paintings or frescoes.
- By requesting that students hold up their completed mosaics and describe their design, while elaborating on the meanings of their personal symbols.